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STATEMENT

by John G. TAYLOR

for the Catholic Institute for International Relations

London

to the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation

New York

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Your Excellencies,

The members of this Committee have heard described many times the often cruel ways in which subject peoples, in East Timor and elsewhere, have suffered their loss of liberty.

No form of deprivation is more debilitating to a people, or causes deeper outrage, than the effacement of its own history and experiences, and its replacement by a version of events that is a fabrication.

Such distortions and manipulations have been experienced by almost all the peoples whose passage from colonisation to independence has been observed and supported by this Committee. In each case, to a greater or lesser degree, it has been the powerful -the occupying power- that has attempted to wrest the historical record from the hands of subject peoples and rewrite their history in a form that flatters its interests and image, and conceals the illegality, exploitation and violence that has almost always accompanied colonial rule.

Your Excellencies,

In my view this injustice has beem imposed in an extreme form upon the East Timorese people, firstly by Portugal, and now -with grave political and economic consequences- by Indonesia.

As an academic, I lecture and research in Development Studies in London. I have written on a range of issues and countries in the Southeast Asian region. I am also a member of the management committee of the Catholic Institute for International Relations in London, and it is in this capacity that I address you today.

I have followed events in East Timor for more than sixteen years, since 1974. Throughout this period, I have kept a documentary record of events in East Timor as they have been reported in the international and Indonesian press. Earlier this year I completed a book, published by the Catholic Institute, which lists and cross references events in chronological order, entitled a Chronology of the Indonesian Occupation of East Timor. I have also just completed a manuscript on East Timor's contemporary history, based largely upon accounts from East Timorese refugees interviewed in Portugal, Indonesia and Australia. Today I would like to confine my remarks to the Committee to a few reflections based upon my experiences in writing these books, and in particular, in preparing the Chronology, a copy of which I have given to the Chair of this Committee, as part of my submission.

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A history based upon press reports has one outstanding virtue: It assembles a record of events that is a reasonably accurate account of what actually happened at the time. Certainly, it is capable of misrepresenting the past; but it cannot reflect political interpretations that were imposed at a later date.

Since two incompatible versions of East Timor's recent history have been presented by different parties to this dispute, this makes the exercise of trying to establish an honest historical record both relevant and useful.

The two theories will be familiar to this Committee and to the diplomatic community. One is advanced by the Indonesian government, and affirms inter alia that the Indonesian army invaded East Timor in support of and at the request of the East Timorese community, that the people of East Timor opted to join Indonesia in 1976, and that the nationalists who resist Indonesian rule do not command the support of East Timor's people.

The second theory is advanced by the Portuguese government and, it must be said, by most academics outside Indonesia. This view affirms, on the same issues, that the great majority of East Timorese opposed the invasion, that the population has never completed an act of self-determination, still less voted to join Indonesia, and that the survival of a resistance movement is evidence of East Timorese alienation from Indonesian rule.

The point that I wish to emphasise is that, when it comes to determining the political and diplomatic foundations of this dispute and its settlement, everything depends upon which of the two versions of historical events is accepted as true. Did Indonesia lay claim to East Timor before 1975, or not? Did East Timorese volunteers or Indonesian units cross the border from Indonesian Timor to fight Fretilin forces in 1975? Did East Timorese freely call for incorporation into Indonesia in 1976, or was the vote unrepresentative and forced? Are those who fight against Indonesian forces an abject remnant or do they command widespread popular support?

In short, who speaks for East Timor's people? Is it Indonesia's diplomatic representative, seated here? Is it the representative of Portugal, itself historically guilty of colonialism towards this people? Is it the leaders of East Timor's political

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parties in exile -who cannot return in safety to their own country? Or is it others, to whom we cannot give names, who cannot be present here, whose voices are thus effaced from the proceedings of this and every international body that deliberates upon their future?

Your Excellencies,
The first principle of the United Nations Charter affirms the sovereignty of peoples and their sovereign right to choose their future. That commitment lies at the heart of the United Nations, and it is the motive force of this Committee. The case of East Timor must be seen in this context -especially now, when, as many speakers have reminded us, this is to be the international decade of decolonisation.

It is true that East Timor is a case where there are many interpretations and many ambiguities. But there are also some simple truths.

I have come to the conclusion, after examining the numerous reports that went into the Chronology, that whilst contemporary reports do not support in every respect the political theses of any of the principal parties to the dispute, nevertheless, the historical version of events presented by the Indonesian government is false and cannot be defended when set against the facts.

The evidence also shows that East Timor's people have not been consulted in a manner that would fulfil either United Nations or international criteria.

May I close by reminding the Committee of the importance of Bishop Carlos Filipe Belo's letter of February 1989. Its argument remains as relevant today as when it was written -indeed, it has been relevant ever since the Indonesian invasion of East Timor.

Bishop Belo states that the people must be consulted about what they want. As he subsequently stressed, however, such a consultation does not prejudge the eventual outcome. A result must emerge, and can only emerge, from a genuine act of free-choice exercised by East Timor's people.

Your Excellencies,
For too many years, the history of East Timor's people has been prejudged -by other iterests and other powers. For many years, Portugal did so. Today Indonesia does so. This is an injustice

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and an imposition which is every bit as corrupting and destructive of good government and civilised political conduct as the violations of human rights that have so often been brought to this Committee's attention.

The United Nations Charter is surely categorical on this matter. It is the people, the sovereign people alone, who shall decide their future -who shall write their own history. Which version of East Timor's history is to prevail? That decision will determine how the United Nations conducts its mandate, and whether the security and dignity of East Timor's people will be given true consideration by the international community.

On behalf of the Catholic Institute, I thank you for your attention.